DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 298 EC 200 475

AUTHOR Cahn, Lorynne D.
TITLE Teaching Piano Students with Learning Disabilities.
PUB DATE Feb 87
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Conference of the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities (24th, San Antonio, TX, February 25-28, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Auditory Discrimination; *Auditory Training; Elementary Secondary Education; Eye Hand Coordination; *Learning Disabilities; *Musical Instruments; *Music Education; *Music Teachers; Perceptual Handicaps; Perceptual Motor Coordination; *Teacher Student Relationship; Visual Discrimination
IDENTIFIERS *Piano Instruction

ABSTRACT

The relationship between the teacher of piano and the learning disabled student and some issues in piano instruction for such students are examined. Perceptual deficiencies and perceptual motor problems are noted. Techniques for dealing with poor visual discrimination are suggested; these include doing the simplest type of theory work to help the student learn to read notes and understanding students' difficulties in right-left discrimination and orientation to middle C. In dealing with auditory discrimination problems, teachers are advised to minimize the number of auditory stimuli, introduce complexities only after very simple note patterns are understood, present a fragment of a concept at a time, and exercise listening skills. Poor eye-hand coordination can be dealt with in a similar fashion, beginning at the most rudimentary level. To address the emotional problems that some learning disabled children may exhibit, a rotation is suggested among piano playing, theory, and game playing in brief 10-minute segments. Twelve general guidelines, such as the importance of students experiencing success and of strong teacher-student rapport, conclude the paper. (CL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED286298

Teaching Piano Students with Learning Disabilities

by

Lorynne D. Cahn

The learning-disabled child is likely to eliminate himself from many extracurricular activities because of the nature of his handicap. He often will not participate in competitive sports: clumsiness and poor gross motor skills do not make him a prize member of a team. He often will not be a writer for the school newspaper: his perceptual difficulties create great deficiencies in writing, spelling, and syntax. When it comes to individual music lessons, the determinants for participation have very little to do with his abilities. As Susan Raccoli described to parents, the reason for lessons, "You have achieved the American goal of middle-class status and can afford lessons, plus you want your child to have all the opportunities you did not, and you hope that playing piano will make your child a little bit happier or even more popular, or maybe you sense a flicker of interest and/or talent in your child. . . ."[1]

If what Raccoli said is true, the placement of a child in piano lessons cuts across ability range, and a variety of children do take lessons. When it is recognized that a large percentage of the school-age population evidences learning disabilities (2-5 percent severely, and 10-15 percent mildly), the chances are quite good that piano instructors will encounter

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lorynne D Cahn
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EC 200475

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

at least several learning-disabled children in a career. Thus, it is the purpose here to explore the unique relationship between the piano teacher and the learning-disabled student. In this way it will be possible to elucidate effective means of understanding learning disabilities as they affect piano instruction and to outline various approaches to and strategies for coping with them.

The continuous nature of piano instruction sets it apart from academic classroom instruction, presenting both special drawbacks and special opportunities. The yearly change of teacher in an academic classroom gives the child a chance to reshape a behavior image, but with the same music teacher year after year old behaviors may continue long after they are needed by the child.[2] "It is possible that last year's behavior may be reestablished each year by the child as a result of an unconscious expectation by the music teacher."[3]

The corollary of this situation is, of course, that with a long-term relationship a piano teacher can be both helpful to the learning-disabled child and capable of pacing instruction to what Johnson referred to as the "range of challenge":[4] an optimum level of complexity which is not too simple to be boring and not too difficult to be frustrating. For the piano teacher of the learning-disabled child, finding this range of challenge is a complicated task, one which can involve very close attention to clinical assessment. Where possible, a consultation with the parent or the classroom teacher can help

pinpoint the particular areas of weakness in perceptual and motor areas. As the discussion of these weaknesses and the concommitant emotional difficulties will indicate, strategies for piano instruction for the learning-disabled child can be very different from those used in teaching other children in the regular classroom.

It is essential at the outset that the piano instructor reevaluate the goals of teaching his instrument to the learning-disabled child. As will be seen in the following section, the very areas of sensory discrimination and motor coordination used in piano playing are the ones in which the learning-disabled child is usually most deficient. Obviously there are always exceptions, but a brilliant concert performer is probably not going to be molded from a student with a learning disability. On the other hand, those same goals cited by Raccoli--happiness, social ease--are well within the grasp of these special piano students. Moreover, it has been shown that improvement in perceptual areas and in sensory-motor integration can be corellated with music instruction.[5] While it is probably not the role of the piano teacher actively to play a role in academic skill improvement, it is helpful for the sake of this discussion to know that a learning-disabled child can profit from piano instruction in a variety of ways.

Clinical variables

The debate over terminology in the field of learning disabilities has raged for decades. Because it is a field

which involves a range of professionals--doctors, teachers, occupational therapists, psychologists, social workers--each has some sort of labeling system for these children whose most obvious presenting symptom is a blatant discrepancy between apparent capability and actual level of functioning, particularly in language. An umbrella definition for the purpose of this paper is that learning-disabled children have some form of perceptual motor impairment involving the lack of normal functioning of either the perceptual processes (visual, auditory, tactile), the motor processes (speaking, writing, manipulating, walking), or both.[6] The permutations and combinations from this framework are numerous, but in relation to piano instruction only three major areas will be examined. In the group of perceptual processes, visual discrimination and auditory discrimination will be discussed, and in the group combining perceptual and motor processes, hand-eye coordination will be covered.

Poor visual discrimination

Children with poor visual discrimination have difficulties in learning to distinguish differences in shapes, forms, colors, quantities, and sizes. In reading and mathematics, letters like p and b and d, and g and q, and numerals like 6 and 9 present problems to these children. The similarity of these letters to notes with stems makes it obvious that some of the problems of reading and math occur in music instruction.

Reading notes, a task which involves discriminating among similar shapes and in interpreting spatial relationships, must be handled painstakingly with the learning-disabled student of piano. In her study involving a seven-year-old boy with speech problems and difficulties with motor coordination, Rejto used a variety of strategies in her individualized piano lessons. With regard to note-reading, she did not instruct him in reading from the staff in beginning lessons. Presenting simple melodies to mimic from rote with one finger was an introduction which sidestepped written music.[7] Other early learning strategies can include coding notes by finger number or by letter names, even actually labeling fingers and keys if the child seems to need it. This is a first step in understanding the new "code" that music represents.

Because visual discrimination problems make note-reading a difficult task, pains should be taken not to discourage the learning-disabled student at the outset by expecting an ability to play notes as they appear on a printed page. However, separate theory work brought to its simplest level--drawing clefs, staffs, notes--is essential to building a capacity actually to read music. Depending on the visual difficulties, it may be necessary at the outset to do extremely simple exercises, such as tracing staffs and clefs or note-drawing on large sheets of paper. It is important to devise strategies which keep a minimal number of visual stimuli on a page, introduce a fragment of a concept at a time (e.g., on adding stems, work on finding the third line), and use color coding, identification

games and any simple means to help the learning-disabled child understand the piano without succumbing to visual obstacles. The student can later progress to activities such as placing notes on lines on regular music paper. Theory instruction sequence can follow normal instruction if the learning-disabled child masters the simpler aspects of musical encoding.

The piano keyboard itself may create visual obstacles to the learning-disabled child. The keyboard presents a repeating pattern of black and white, and an orientation to middle C may require marking it for the child in early lessons. Also, the black keys are visually more striking than the white keys, and early melodies played on the black keys are easier for the child with visual discrimination problems. It is essential to remember that the jargon of the keyboard--up and down--is simple for other children but may take time to assimilate for the learning-disabled child. The ability to distinguish left from right is another difficult area for some learning-disabled children. It may be necessary repeatedly to call attention to which hand is playing a bar of music, and much later lessons can include pieces which involve left crossing over right.

In general, dealing with problems in visual discrimination is much easier when the instructor knows the problem is "normal" for the learning-disabled child. Strategies which help him grapple with his deficiency will bring him as far as he is able to go in translating notes into music. It may

take quite a while to do so from a printed page, but the ability to produce a melody will give the child that important early motivation to move on to more complex tasks. Moreover, any success with learning a whole new symbolic code will give a learning-disabled child a sense of mastery he probably did not experience when trying to learn to read and compute.

Poor auditory discrimination

To understand the exact nature of an auditory discrimination problem, it is essential to recognize the difference between hearing and listening. Children with a learning disability almost always are born with normal hearing. There are many, however, who need training in the skill of listening so that they can respond to disciplined auditory activities. These skills, which include concentration, discrimination, and integration, come into play at every stage of piano study.

Piano instruction is a discipline which offers a rare total integration of visual discrimination and auditory feedback. The pianist sees the notes, and in turn hears them played. Therefore in many ways the handling of weaknesses in listening skills parallels the strategies for strengthening and/or sidestepping visual skills. In the introductory lessons, for instance, when the first experience at the piano involves a simple melody played from rote, the simplicity of the sound pattern can help the child with problems in auditory discrimination. He can feel the rhythm, and he may profit from playing simple tunes which have words to reinforce the sense of the rhythm.

Similarly, when drawing the student's attention to the repeating visual pattern of the keyborad, he can be introduced to the concept of pitch, perhaps playing a simple melody at various places.

When devising strategies for dealing with auditory discrimination problems, the same three rules delineated for visual problems apply: it is necessary to keep to a minimum the number of auditory stimuli, introducing complexities like keys and scales, chords, and intervals only after very simple note patterns are fully understood; it is necessary to introduce a fragment of a concept at a time; and it is helpful to use songs, identification games, and other simple tactics to exercise listening skills in a stimulating, interest-generating way.

In language training, learning-disabled children are introduced to sound discrimination by first encountering gross differences: bells, buzzers, blocks. Only later are sounds refined to reflect minute differences which cause difficulty in formal school situations. In piano instruction it can be helpful to remember that these children are expected to begin listening training on such a simplistic level. Extreme limitations may make it necessary to begin piano instruction in an equally elementary fashion.

Poor eye-hand coordination

Poor eye-hand coordination generally means a difficulty making the hand do what the eye sees. It occurs when an

individual does not develop instantaneous, involuntary motor reactions to brain signals. In playing a musical instrument, the response process is complicated by the fact that the mind must first decode what it sees on the printed page and then send a signal to hands which are striking a surface not in the line of vision.

Even before the introduction of note-reading, most of pinao instruction involves eye-hand coordination, from striking keys to performing drawing tasks in simple theory lessons. Again it is essential to work at the most rudimentary level: it may even be necessary in early lessons for the teacher to point at the keys to be played in the simple melodies. Generally speaking, the same learning experiences in which visual discrimination problems occur also can involve hand-eye coordination difficulties. In piano playing, progressing slowly from rote melodies to playing with numbers drawn on fingers and on corresponding keys parallels the strategy for coping with visual problems. The child must gradually build up to an ability to strike the correct keys when not looking at them directly.

In theory instruction, the lessons which progress from drawing on large paper to gradually refined tasks in the theory book also help. Writing notes, drawing stems, placing notes on lines--all these are tasks in which eye-hand coordination weaknesses mean building skills by tiny increments. The child is working on similar skills in his academic work: for example in handwriting. He will grow in the mastery of eye-hand

coordination skills to the degree that he is not handicapped by the learning disability.

Emotional difficulties

All the strategies for teaching piano in the face of perceptual and motor weaknesses can fail if the concomitant emotional problems are not recognized. Learning-disabled children seem very immature in non-cognitive and non-physical areas: they are often hyperactive and very distractible. This means irritability, emotional lability, and a short attention span. The implications for piano instruction are significant. A one-hour lesson, even when divided between playing the piano and doing theory and games away from the piano, may test the limits of manageability of the learning-disabled child. Frequent breaks and very small periods of concentraton will draw the best performance from the learning-disabled child. A rotation among piano-playing, theory, and game-playing in approximately ten-minute segments would be preferable. This arrangement allows the child frequent respites from the intense concentration piano instruction requires.

Emotionally, a one-to-one relationship with a piano teacher is very rewarding for the learning-disabled child. Unlike the competitive atmosphere of the classroom, the piano lesson offers an environment where the child competes only against himself. Moreover, he has the full attention and positive feedback of an adult whose sole focus for sixty minutes is the child's progress. Frequent praise and concern from a

caring piano teacher help bolster the child's self-esteem and help foster the motivation he needs to put forth his best effort. The only constraints then are the child's frustration limits, and a lesson can be managed flexibly to accommodate the pace he needs.

Guidelines for Teaching Piano Students with Learning Disabilities

Several general policies for working with learning-disabled children can be applicable in piano instruction:

1. It is essential for the piano teacher to establish strong rapport with the child: like all others he will be responsive to kindness and attention. Yet firm control also must be established and maintained.

2. Learning-disabled children need to experience success. By beginning with tasks at their performance level and gradually increasing the skill required, they will continue to have a sense of mastery. It is vital for the music teacher to keep them within their "range of challenge."

3. Piano playing and theory activities should be broken into separate, manageable steps because learning-disabled children can handle most effectively one concept at a time.

4. The low environmental stimulation and lack of peer pressure and competition of individual piano lessons is the most preferred for the learning-disabled child.

5. A piano teacher, like all teachers of the learning disabled, should refrain from wearing bright clothing and ornamentation which can easily divert this child's attention.

6. A creative capacity on the part of the teacher to use a variety of approaches is essential. Repetition during piano lessons and a use of all the senses--particularly visual, auditory, and tactile--is helpful.

7. Learning-disabled children learn best from activity and grow through listening, watching, and imitating. Therefore time at the piano should be divided between teacher demonstration and the child's actual performance.

8. Learning-disabled children take longer to complete tasks; patience and a lack of pressure on the part of the piano teacher are essential.

9. A flexible piano teacher will successfully cope with the fact that learning-disabled children often forget what they have just recently learned. Frequent repetition is most importnat.

10. During a piano lesson a loose setting which permits short breaks and minimizes periods of sitting still is most effective for the learning-disabled student.

11. Communication with the parent and with regular school personnel can help pinpoint areas of weakness of the learning-disabled piano student and make it possible for lessons to reflect growth strides made in the academic classroom.

12. Finally, learning-disabled children studying piano need to hear that an instructor believes in their capability yet knows often times they must learn in ways different from their peers.

Learning-disabled children are no strangers to failure, both in academic and social settings. Therefore, piano lessons offer them a rare opportunity. When instruction is paced to accommodate their weaknesses, they can truly experience success. Moreover, they can claim mastery of a skill which gives them something in common with others--or something special that they alone have learned. The piano teacher who is willing to grapple with alternate approaches to learning the instrument can contribute a great deal to the overall growth of a learning-disabled child.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Susan Raccoli, "Why Do Piano Lessons Fail?", The American Music Teacher (Feb./Mar. 1983): 40.

[2]Betty W. Atterbury, "Music Teachers Need Your Help," The Journal of Learning Disabilities 17 (February 1984): 75.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Rebecca Johnson, "Finding the Range of Challenge for the Piano Student," The American Music Teacher (April/May 1983): 40.

[5]Alice Rejto, "Music as an Aid in the Remediation of Learning Disabilities," The Journal of Learning Disabilities 6 (May 1973): 24.

[6]Sylvia O. Richardson, Learning Disabilities: An Introduction (Pittsburgh: The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities), p. 3.

Paper presented at the Annual International Conference

of the

Association for Children with Learning Disabilities

(24th, San Antonio, TX, February 25-28, 1987)